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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001629

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SUBJECT: OPEN TALK OF BOUTEFLIKA RUNNING FOR A THIRD TERM  
IN 2009

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) More Algerian politicians and officials anticipate that the Algerian constitution will be amended to enable President Bouteflika to run for a third term in 2009. Mohamed Afif, a well-connected senior official in the predominant National Liberation Front (FLN) told Ambassador November 5 that the decision was already made. The information was as good as official, he counseled. Afif stated that the FLN would use its solid pluralities in the Algerian upper and lower houses of the parliament to build coalitions with independents and splinters from other parties in favor of a majority that would vote to change the constitution. He predicted that once these majorities became evident, most other secular, nationalist parliamentarians would join the bandwagon. (He underlined that the RND party, whose leader Ahmed Ouyahia is often rumored as the next president, would come over en bloc.) Thus, even if the Islamists and Berber opposition parties opposed it, the amendment would pass. Afif predicted the parliament would move forward on this amendment during the first half of 2008. The FLN, meanwhile, would hold a party congress and nominate Bouteflika as its candidate. The election, he anticipated, would occur on schedule in April 2009.

12. (C) Another senior member of the FLN party leadership, Taha Khelia, told Ambassador November 4 that Bouteflika wants to run for a third term and the FLN was concentrating hard on the local elections to help pave the way. According to Khelia, the FLN leadership (headed by Prime Minister Belkhadem) is trying to put at the top of election lists men who as mayors, city council presidents and provincial legislature presidents will loudly proclaim support for Bouteflika in 2008. The goal, Khelia claimed, is to make Bouteflika appear as if he is responding to a popular appeal to run. (Comment: We have already seen some small, sycophantic rallies along these lines. Khelia worried that nominating more apparatchiks to top government jobs in the provinces would only hasten the demise of the FLN that is already seriously out of touch with the Algerian street. End Comment.)

13. (C) Well-connected Minister of Environment and Tourism Cherif Rahmani told Ambassador over dinner November 5 that Bouteflika will run for a third term. Rahmani claimed Bouteflika wants a third term and when he announces publicly that he will pursue it, all the other political formations in the government coalition and most of the other political parties will quickly fall in line and support him. (Comment:

Rahmani's remarks are especially important because he -- like Ouyahia -- is usually on the shortlist we hear as a possible replacement for Bouteflika. Rahmani, a former top Interior Ministry official and governor of Algiers, has excellent ties into the security establishment. End Comment.)

14. (C) Afif, after self-assuredly stating that the parliament would amend the constitution and Bouteflika would run, carefully asked about the likely American reaction. The Ambassador noted that it was not up to Washington to determine whether or not the constitution should be amended or Bouteflika should have a third term. He told Afif that we would look most carefully at the process by which an amendment moves forward. We would especially watch the parliamentary debate and whether the opposition got to make its views widely known to the Algerian public, and whether there was any pressure put on opponents of the amendment by the security services. We would obviously watch the election process itself very closely as well. Lastly, the Ambassador noted, we would want to see Bouteflika's vision for Algeria and how he proposes to address serious problems given our interest in Algerian stability and gradual political evolution. Afif made no substantive comment.

15. (S) Comment: Parliamentary Speaker Ziari publicly predicted a constitutional amendment last September, but the talk quickly died. Now it is back. Bouteflika's health remains an open question when people talk about a third term, but there is no public information on his condition. Those like the Canadian and outgoing Italian ambassadors who have seen him in the past six weeks reported that he looks better than he did last year. He has had a busier schedule in the autumn of 2007 than he did in the autumn of 2006 too. One knowledgeable former Presidency staffer predicted to us

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earlier this year that Bouteflika, who is unmarried and has no children, would follow in the footsteps of his political mentor, former President Boumedienne, and leave office only upon death. The other big question is whether or not the military and intelligence services would readily agree to a third term. (It is not impossible that this renewed talk of a third term is simply an effort by the pro-Bouteflika faction to outflank opposition in the security establishment.) If Bouteflika's health remains about as it is now, and if the security services ultimately accept his running again, we could see the momentum for an amendment and Bouteflika candidacy move in the first part of 2008. We will need to think carefully about what we say, publicly and privately, about an amendment and the prospect of a third term.  
FORD